

WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE

FROM BUILDING CHILDHOOD TREE FORTS TO DESIGNING COMMUNITY SPACES, THEY'RE EXCELLING IN A MALE-DOMINATED FIELD



BOBBI HEPPER OLSON, FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL OF HEPPER OLSON ARCHITECTS BASED IN BUXTON, NORTH DAKOTA. / COURTESY HEPPER OLSON ARCHITECTS

BY CARRIE MCDERMOTT

As a child, Helen White's hobbies included building houses for her Barbies and constructing tree and snow forts with her brother. In high school, she watched with curiosity the transformation of her school as it was renovated.

"Watching the beautiful renovation and addition unfold and seeing how the new spaces inspired pride in my classmates and our community left a lasting impression on me. To explore further, my parents arranged for me to job shadow a family friend who worked at JLG in Fargo. Seeing her projects and hearing the stories behind the designs was captivating. After touring NDSU's stunning architecture school, I knew I had found my future," White said.

She credits her mother for planting the idea of becoming an architect.

"Growing up in a small town without an architectural firm, I hadn't considered it as a career path until she directly asked me if it was something I'd ever thought about," White said.

Today, White, AIA, is a licensed architect and an associate project manager in the health-care studio of JLG Architects in Bismarck. She earned

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— Helen White, architect and associate project manager with JLG Architects

her master's degree in architecture from North Dakota State University in 2020 and started working for the firm shortly after.

"Starting my professional journey during the pandemic gave me a deep appreciation for the critical role health-care spaces play in our communities," she said. "My early focus on health-care design showed me how architecture can profoundly impact patients, families, and the wider community, and I've been passionate about it ever since."

In 2023, women made up 27% of the total architect population, according to the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards.

Over five years, between 2019 and 2023, the architect population has shown a continuous trend toward greater gender parity. Although still considered a male-dominated field, more resources, programs and partnerships are working to help inspire more girls to become the next generation of architects.

White said the best advice she's received about the architecture field is, "to be a strong advocate for yourself and your career. This has encouraged me to embrace new challenges, share my ideas with confidence, and seek opportunities that align with my goals and values," she said.

The fast-paced schedules often driven by financial pressures are some of the challenges White experiences in the field. Most projects require quick turnarounds to meet tight deadlines and minimize the client's costs, she said.

"While these timelines are a reality, I always strive to take a step back and ensure that our work remains aligned with the original design vision. This approach helps maintain the integrity

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and purpose of the project while meeting the client's goals," White said.

Bobbi Hepper Olson, founder and principal of Hepper Olson Architects based in Buxton, North Dakota, also became interested in the field in childhood.

"I've wanted to be an architect since fifth grade, though at the time I didn't fully understand what the profession involved — I just knew I was fascinated by buildings," she said. "Growing up in a small town in North Dakota with a population of about 250, my exposure to architecture was limited. My family didn't travel much, so most of what I learned came from books and television."

Her fifth-grade teacher first introduced Hepper Olson to the idea of architecture, sparking an interest, but it was her high school English and art teacher, Mrs. Gomez, who inspired Hepper Olson to pursue a career in it.

"She recognized my passion for art and architecture and encouraged me to explore these interests by assigning English papers related to architectural topics," Hepper Olson said.

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HELEN WHITE, AIA, IS A LICENSED ARCHITECT AND AN ASSOCIATE PROJECT MANAGER IN THE HEALTH-CARE STUDIO OF JLG ARCHITECTS IN BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA. / COURTESY JLG ARCHITECTS

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"She introduced me to the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, sparking my fascination with architectural design. Mrs. Gomez also went above and beyond by arranging an interior design correspondence course through NDSU when I was a junior in high school, providing me with early exposure to design principles."

Her curiosity and passion for design were the foundations of her journey into the field and early into her career, Hepper Olson worked as an architectural intern at Johnson Laffen Architects (now known as JLG Architects) in Grand Forks.

"(Founders) Gary Johnson and Lonnie Laffen were instrumental mentors — Gary's dedication to detailing and professionalism, combined with Lonnie's drive for elevated design, created a dynamic learning environment that deeply shaped



ERIN PETERSON IS A STAFF ARCHITECT WITH HEPPER OLSON ARCHITECTS IN BUXTON, NORTH DAKOTA. / COURTESY HEPPER OLSON ARCHITECTS

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HEPPER OLSON ARCHITECTS DESIGNED THE DELTA UPSILON FRATERNITY HOUSE ON THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA CAMPUS IN GRAND FORKS IN 2021. EVERY SPACE WITHIN THE HOUSE WAS THOUGHTFULLY DESIGNED WITH THE COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN MIND, CREATING A VIBRANT LIVING ENVIRONMENT THAT FOSTERS COMMUNITY SPIRIT. / COURTESY DAN FRANCIS PHOTOGRAPHY

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my approach to the architecture profession," Hepper Olson said.

In addition to meeting deadlines and keeping projects on budget, it's equally important to maintain strong relationships and clear communication with clients and project teams, she said.

"Successful projects come from a balance of efficient project management and thoughtful design," Hepper Olson said.

Her favorite aspect of the job is seeing "a design on paper come to life as a fully realized facility that reflects the client's vision," she said. "I also have a deep appreciation for historic preservation and renovation work. I enjoy researching a building's history and exploring the original construction methods and innovations used over the years. This process is both fascinating and educational, continually expanding my understanding of different building types and how materials and techniques have evolved over time."

Erin Peterson is a staff architect with Hepper Olson Architects who started out as a drafter at a small firm in St. Cloud, Minnesota. She went from a technical college to architecture school where she learned about editing designs, which can

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— Bobbi Hepper Olson, founder and principal of Hepper Olson Architects



change at any point in the process depending on the needs of the client.

"Growing up I was always interested in art and was intrigued that it was possible to take a two-dimensional drawing one step further by creating a building that can be developed from an idea," Peterson said. "My parents were building a house throughout my childhood and the progression of how things go together to make a finished product was a daily occurrence. This taught me early on how to look beyond what is in front of you to envision the finished product."

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